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Mr. FISHER's

SERMON

ON THE DAY OF THE EXECUTION

OF

HENRY BLACKBURN.

BRITISH MUSEUM

A

SERMON:

DELIVERED

At SALEM, *January* 14, 1796,

OCCASIONED BY THE

Execution of HENRY BLACKBURN,

ON THAT DAY,

For the Murder of GEORGE WILKINSON.

BY

NATHANIEL FISHER, *A.M.*

RECTOR OF SAINT PETER'S CHURCH, SALEM.

PUBLISHED AT THE DESIRE OF THE WARDENS AND VESTRY.

Printed by S. HALL, in BOSTON, for J. DARNEY, in SALEM.

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For we muſt all appear before the Judgment Seat of CHRIST, *that every one may receive the things done in his body, according to that he hath done, whether it be good or bad.*

2d CORINTHIANS, V. 10.

AS the doctrine of a future ſtate of retribution is the principal ſupport of piety and virtue, the great and univerſal importance of it muſt be obvious. And that this is a doctrine "worthy of all acceptation," we have the concurrent teſtimonies of natural and revealed religion.

Our text leads us to conſider—The certainty of a future judgment—Some of the peculiarities of this judgment, as revealed in the goſpel—And the purpoſes for which God hath appointed it.

In regard to the certainty of a future ſtate of retribution, let it be obſerved,

That the judgment we paſs upon our own actions, or that faculty by which we diſcover the difference between good and evil, is the foundation of many of

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our moſt pleaſing hopes, and of our moſt diſquieting fears. The ſatisfactions which accompany a life of innocence, are greatly increaſed by the expectation of a future recompence; and the terrors of a guilty conſcience as greatly enhanced.

And we ſee, in many inſtances, that the diſpenſations of Providence in the preſent ſtate, are promiſcuous and unequal. No certain concluſions can be drawn from them, in regard to the virtue or the vice of men. The righteous often ſuffer, and for being righteous: And the wicked proſper, and proſper through their wickedneſs.

And although the wiſe and conſiderate in all ages, from a conviction that virtue was excellent in itſelf, and that vice was pernicious in its own nature, have endeavored to reward the former, and to puniſh the latter, according to their reſpective merits; yet no human laws have ever been able to effect theſe moſt deſirable purpoſes. No human tribunal can inveſtigate the ſecret emotions of the heart, the fource from which all our actions proceed; and in proportion to the relation which they bear to this fountain, they deſerve either cenſure, or praiſe. The ſpecious hypocrite may come forward, and challenge the ſevereſt ſcrutiny, while the fear of a diſcovery has led him to commit his vile enormities in the dark. But, that impartial juſtice may be diſpenſed, the motives and intentions of the agent muſt be known. The rich, who, of their abundance caſt much into the treaſury, will undoubtedly receive their reward; and yet, the poor widow's two mites may entitle her to a much greater recompence.

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Should the internal ſatisfactions which accompany a virtuous life, and the miſeries which commonly overtake the wicked, be urged, as an adequate reward to the former, and a ſufficient puniſhment to the latter; it may be aſked, whether any degree of external affluence, in addition to the pleaſures which flow from a good conſcience, ſeparate from the views of eternity, would be deemed by a wiſe man, an adequate recompence for the exquiſite ſufferings with which the inflexibly virtuous are ſometimes called to ſtruggle?

As theſe inequalities have been from the beginning of the world, we have all reaſon to ſuppoſe, that they will continue unto the end of it. And from this ſtate of things, it is natural to conclude, that there will be a future ſtate of retribution, in which all theſe inequalities will be rectified, and impartial juſtice diſpenſed to every man.

And this has been the prevailing opinion, in every age, and in every nation. It is true, that one ſect of philoſophers among the heathen, and ſome among the Jews, denied the reſurrection of the dead; but thoſe characters were not very numerous; they bore ſcarce any kind of proportion to the body of the people, the great multitude, who received the doctrine of a future judgment. On no other principle can we account for the worſhip of the dead; and for the animated deſcriptions which the poets have given of the Elyſian fields: In which all the virtuous are repreſented in a ſtate of happineſs, and in the enjoyment of the fruits of their paſt labors: While the wicked are excluded thoſe happy abodes, and conſigned to the regions of wo and miſery forever. And although the rewards and puniſhments aſſigned

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to theſe characters, in the future world, are very different in their nature, from thoſe which revelation has taught *us* to expect hereafter, and fall infinitely below them; yet they are ſtrongly expreſſive of the general opinion concerning the doctrine before us. The Apoſtle, in his addreſs to the Gentiles, obſerves, that, "the inviſible things of him," (God) "from the creation of the world, are clearly ſeen, being underſtood by the things which are made, even his eternal power and Godhead. So that they are without excuſe, becauſe that, when they knew God, they glorified him not as God."

But, although the religion of nature taught men to expect a future ſtate of retribution, in which they would be rewarded and puniſhed, according to their reſpective deſerts, (and the evidences of this great doctrine have been confirmed by every revelation which God has given of himſelf), yet, it gave no intimations of the circumſtances which would attend it. For theſe moſt ſolemn and intereſting diſcoveries, we are indebted to the revelation of Jeſus Chriſt; through whom, "life and immortality" are "brought to light:" i. e. more fully and clearly revealed.

The firſt of theſe peculiar and important diſcoveries which I ſhall mention, is this,——That there will be a DAY, on which all the generations of men, will be gathered together, in one great and general aſſembly, to receive the reſpective rewards of their paſt behavior.

"When the Son of man ſhall come in his glory, then ſhall be gathered before him all nations—God hath appointed a DAY, in which he will judge the world in righteouſneſs—But of that DAY and hour, knoweth

knoweth no man, not even the Son." This is one of thoſe "ſecret things" which "belong to God." But we are informed, that this judgment will take place "at the end of the world," an indefinite period; and which may be much nearer than we apprehend! And when it ſhall commence, we are aſſured, that it will be accompanied by a univerſal reſurrection—of all who in this world have ever taſted death.

"We muſt all appear before the judgment ſeat of Chriſt," &c. "Verily, verily, I ſay unto you, the hour is coming, and even now is, when the dead ſhall hear the voice of the Son of God, and they that hear him ſhall live."—"Marvel not at this, for the hour is coming, in which all that are in the graves ſhall hear his voice, and ſhall come forth, they that have done good, unto the reſurrection of life, and they that have done evil, unto the reſurrection of damnation."

And immediately after this general reſurrection, we are informed, the world which we now inhabit will appear all in flames, and be utterly deſtroyed by fire.

"The Lord Jeſus ſhall be revealed from heaven in flaming fire, taking vengeance on them who know not God, and who obey not the goſpel of our Lord Jeſus Chriſt." "The day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night, in which the heavens ſhall paſs away in a great noiſe, and the elements ſhall melt with fervent heat. The earth alſo, and all that therein is, ſhall be burned up. Seeing then, that all theſe things are to be diſſolved, what manner of perſons ought we to be, in all holy converſation and godlineſs!"

Another circumſtance concerning this future judgment, revealed in the goſpel, reſpects the perſon, to

whom the judiciary powers of that great and ſolemn day are committed. And this is the Lord Jeſus Chriſt himſelf. The perſon who once appeared in this world, in the form of a ſervant, and to ſave ſinners, although "the Lord of life and glory"—"who went about doing good"—and after a life of the pureſt benevolence, and of unſpotted innocence, "was taken, and by wicked hands, crucified and ſlain. But God raiſed him up."

"The Father judgeth no man, but hath committed all judgment to the Son.—It is Jeſus that is ordained of God to be the judge of quick and dead—God will judge the world in righteouſneſs, by that man Jeſus Chriſt, whom he hath appointed."

In ſome paſſages of ſcripture, God himſelf is ſaid to be the judge of all the earth, and who will do right—and that he will reward every man according to his deeds; "To them who by patient continuance in well doing, ſeek for glory, and honor, and immortality, eternal life; but unto them that are contentious, indignation and wrath, tribulation and anguiſh upon every ſoul of man that doeth evil." But theſe texts may be reconciled with the former, when we conſider, that the future judgment will commence on the day appointed by God; and that all the tranſactions of it will be managed by his Son; to whom he has delegated his authority and power; and who will perform all the duties of that great and ſolemn office, in perfect obedience to the will of his Father.

Another peculiarity, and which deſerves our moſt ſerious attention, is the *manner* in which he will appear upon that ſolemn occaſion.

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"He ſhall come in his own glory, in the glory of God, and in the glory of his holy angels—he ſhall ſit upon the throne of his glory, and all nations ſhall be gathered before him. And he ſhall ſeparate them, one from the other, as a ſhepherd divideth his ſheep from the goats. The Lord himſelf ſhall deſcend from heaven with a ſhout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God. The dead in Chriſt ſhall riſe firſt, and they that are alive ſhall be changed, and caught up to meet the Lord in the air."

Further, the goſpel of Jeſus Chriſt diſcloſes the purpoſes of God, in the appointment of this future judgment: namely, That his wiſdom, juſtice, goodneſs and mercy, may be univerſally acknowledged and magnified—That all the ungodly may be convinced "of all their hard ſpeeches ſpoken againſt him"—And that the glory of the great Judge may be moſt illuſtriouſly diſplayed—"That all men ſhould honor the Son, even as they honor the Father"—Becauſe "thou haſt loved righteouſneſs and hated iniquity, therefore God, even thy God, hath anointed thee with the oil of gladneſs above thy fellows"—beſtowed the higheſt and moſt diſtinguiſhed honors upon him, as a peculiar mark of his approbation—and appointed him to the important office of Judge, both of quick and dead, "becauſe he was the ſon of man"—To quiet our fears and apprehenſions on that great day, when we ſhall behold, in the perſon of our Judge, the greateſt benefactor and friend of the human race—one made like unto ourſelves—acquainted with all the imperfections of our nature, and diſpoſed to pity and compaſſionate our weakneſs.

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" It behoved him to be made like unto his brethren, that he might be a merciful and faithful High Prieſt. For we have not an High Prieſt, which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities."

And here, it may be obſerved, that there is nothing in any of theſe peculiar diſcoveries of the goſpel, concerning a future judgment, inconſiſtent with the principles of natural religion. A Being poſſeſſed of almighty power can gather together all nations on that great day, as eaſily as diſpoſe the individuals of which this numerous aſſembly is compoſed to meet together on the preſent very melancholy occaſion.

And there can be no abſurdity in believing, that the Being who firſt gave us life can reanimate the bodies which we now poſſeſs, and clothe them with freſh powers of life and ſenſibility, after they have laid ever ſo long a period in the graves.

And that the unexampled obedience and ſufferings of our bleſſed Lord and Savior ſhould be moſt openly acknowledged, and rewarded by the Deity, who has declared himſelf to be the " rewarder of all them that diligently ſeek him," is moſt agreeable to all our notions of juſtice.

And does it not appear to be a merciful diſpenſation, that the human race ſhould be judged by one in their own likeneſs ?

And is it not proper and right, that the moſt public and expreſſive marks of approbation ſhould be conferred upon the righteous ; and that the wicked ſhould be as openly expoſed to diſgrace and puniſhment ?

Let us now attend to a few reflections, which ariſe from this moſt intereſting and important of all ſubjects.

And

And Firſt,

Allowing that we know not the nature, nor the proportion of the rewards and puniſhments to be diſpenſed in a future ſtate; yet, this is certain, the goſpel has repreſented them, and the ſolemnities of a future judgment, in the ſtrongeſt light: and in ſuch a manner, as to excite the moſt pleaſing hopes in the virtuous; and the moſt awful apprehenſions in the wicked.

"Then ſhall the King ſay unto them on his right hand, come ye bleſſed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.—Then ſhall he ſay unto them on his left hand, depart from me, ye curſed, into everlaſting fire prepared for the devil and his angels."

Again. From the certainty and circumſtances of a future judgment, how great muſt be the abſurdity of diſſimulation! On that day, "when the ſecrets of all hearts ſhall be diſcloſed," the hope of the hypocrite will periſh. None of thoſe arts and ſubtilties which he once practiſed in the world, and with ſucceſs, will then avail him. He will find no friend to caſt the mantle of charity over his deceptions; nor any corner in which to hide his guilty face. He will appear before his fellow creatures, and before the holy angels, in his true character, and be filled with ſhame and remorſe. The greater his duplicity may have been, the greater will be his confuſion and diſtreſs. He will then reflect on the value and importance of a good conſcience: and be ready to acknowledge, that there are no pleaſures comparable to thoſe which flow from a faithful performance of our reſpective duties, and from an heart which cannot reproach us. Again.

Again. As the hopes given us in the goſpel of Chriſt are moſt glorious, and its promiſes, reſpecting a future world, "exceeding great and precious;" not to extend our principal views towards futurity muſt be the greateſt folly. More eſpecially, as our own feelings, and the circumſtances of all things about us, are continually ſuggeſting the infinite importance of it. This is the "one thing needful," and the greateſt concern we can poſſibly attend to. So great is the diſproportion between things ſpiritual and things temporal, that we muſt ſee where our intereſt lies, and cannot be ignorant of the part we ſhould prefer. As we acknowledge, that the pleaſures of this world are precarious, inadequate to our expectations, and only for a ſeaſon, it becomes us to "ſet our affections on things above, not on things on the earth."

Further. Although the certainty and circumſtances of a future judgment muſt ſtrike the wicked, whenever they reflect upon them, with the utmoſt terror; they afford the greateſt comfort and conſolation to the righteous. There are ſo many contending intereſts in the preſent world, and the paſſions and appetites of men are ſo ſtrong and violent, that the virtuous are often reproached, and cruelly treated: and ſometimes perſecuted unto death. This was the caſe with many of the primitive chriſtians in particular; and who endured the greateſt afflictions, and ſuffered the moſt grievous puniſhments, having "reſpect unto the recompence of the reward." They comforted and ſupported one another with the bleſſed hope of everlaſting life—a future ſtate of exiſtence, in which their integrity would be completely rewarded. "Our light

affliction

affliction which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory. For we muſt all appear before the Judgment ſeat of Chriſt, that every one may receive the things done in his body, according to that he hath done, whether it be good or bad."

The ſubject leads to many more very uſeful reflections; but they cannot be purſued at preſent: And I ſhall cloſe this diſcourſe, with an addreſs to the audience,—and to the criminal.

My Brethren,

In the unhappy priſoner now before you, ſurrounded by the executive officers of juſtice, and faſt bound in the chains of death, you behold a miſerable ſinner; covered with ſhame and ſtung with remorſe: the uſual and juſt effects of a wicked and profligate life!

One end of the law, in ordering him to ſuffer, in this public and ignominious manner, is to alarm and deter others—leſt they ſhould come into the ſame condemnation. And if the ſolemn tranſactions of this day ſhould not touch, and powerfully affect your hearts, they muſt be inſenſible indeed!

And here, permit me to caution you, in great ſeriouſneſs, againſt thoſe vices in particular which lead more immediately to the crime for which this unhappy man is now to ſuffer.

Among others, we may mention a barbarous and cruel temper. It muſt be evident to thoſe who are acquainted with the human heart, that every *kind*, and every *degree* of cruelty practiſed upon man or beaſt,

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leſſens the influence of thoſe tender ſenſibilities implanted in our nature for the moſt benevolent purpoſes, and leaves impreſſions on the mind unfavourable to the intereſts of humanity. The perſon who can wantonly wound and torture a brute, and take delight in his ſufferings, will ſoon become callous to the feelings of his fellow creatures. And ſociety can never be too ſecurely guarded againſt this brutal inſenſibility of temper.

Further. All violent and head-ſtrong paſſions lead to this monſtrous crime: more eſpecially when they have acquired, which is often the caſe, an irreſiſtible authority. A man thus enſlaved is every moment liable to the moſt ſerious and affecting misfortunes.

And revenge, or a diſpoſition to redreſs our own wrongs, leads on to the moſt fatal extremes. Every emotion of this paſſion, is pregnant with danger: and victims without number have been ſacrificed to its raſh and precipitate purpoſes.

But, the moſt awful effects may be expected from a fixed rancor and malevolence of heart. This is the moſt unſociable and wicked temper that can poſſibly poſſeſs a man. It is the temper of that degraded being, "who was a murderer from the beginning." And "every *man*, who hateth his brother, is a murderer" alſo.

To theſe we may add avarice, gaming and diſſipation; which excite contentions and quarrels; expoſe perſons to the ſevereſt temptations; and tend to deſtroy all ſenſe of moral obligations.

There is another vice extremely prejudicial and dangerous, as it leads to the heinous crime of perjury; viz.

viz. raſh and profane ſwearing; which has a tendency to lower the Divine Being in our minds, and to take off that reverential awe which is our natural duty to our Creator.

And if we may credit the confeſſions of many who have ſuffered for the crime of murder, a diſregard to the ſabbath, and to the public worſhip of God, may be conſidered as ruinous to individuals, and highly injurious to the peace and welfare of ſociety. And this, I think, will hardly admit of a doubt, when we reflect, that the public exerciſes of our religion are calculated to keep up a lively and conſtant ſenſe of God, and his providence, upon our minds; to impreſs our hearts with benevolent ſentiments; and to eſtabliſh the principles of ſelf-government, by motives of preſent, and eternal happineſs.

And now let me intreat you, in the moſt ſerious and affectionate manner, to guard yourſelves not only againſt theſe great and moſt pernicious vices, but againſt every *kind* and *degree* of immorality.

If you believe in the exiſtence of a God, who governs the world in wiſdom and equity, and that you are accountable to him for your conduct, you have the ſtrongeſt motives to a religious and virtuous behavior that can poſſibly be laid before you. But, as you ſee that theſe motives, great and powerful as they are, are often ſuperſeded by the ſolicitations of the tempter, attend to the firſt advances of vice, which approaches ſtep by ſtep: "Firſt the blade, then the ear, after that the full corn in the ear." Look upon every deviation from the path of duty, however ſmall, as unjuſtifiable and wrong. Conſider, that every irregular

indulgence leaves an impreſſion on the mind unfavorable to the intereſts of virtue. It leſſens the fear of ſhame, that innate modeſty which is the natural guard of innocence, and weakens the power of conſcience. Be perſuaded, that your duty and happineſs are inſeparably connected; and avoid even "the appearance of evil."

And, may the inſpiration of the Almighty govern your hearts!

I now turn to the criminal.

You, HENRY BLACKBURN, are this day to ſuffer the pains and penalties of an ignominious death; for the unnatural and atrocious crime of MURDER: A crime of the higheſt nature; to which the law of God, and the laws of nations, have annexed this righteous, though awful puniſhment, "he that ſheddeth man's blood, by man ſhall his blood be ſhed."

You have repeatedly proteſted, and in the moſt ſolemn manner, by immediate appeals to heaven, that neither revenge, nor hatred, nor any other malignant paſſion, moved you to take away the life of the perſon who died in conſequence of the wound you gave him. But your country, after a moſt deliberate, ſolemn and impartial inquiry, has pronounced you *guilty*—and guilty of wilful murder. The matter reſts with God and your own ſoul; that God who cannot be deceived, and "who will not be mocked."

But, allowing that you had no deſign againſt the life of the unfortunate ſtranger, who fell a victim to your raſhneſs and folly, this will not wipe away, although

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it may greatly extenuate your guilt. Life is a gift too ſacred to be ſported with; and the weapons of death are not to be uſed lightly and wantonly. And, although you may not have incurred the fearful guilt of *wilful* murder, this is certain, you have ſhed the blood of a fellow creature; and in ſuch a manner as cannot be juſtified in the ſight of God, nor in the opinion of man.

During your confinement, which has been long and tedious, you have had time for the moſt ſerious and deliberate reflections: And you have been encouraged and aſſiſted in the great duty of repentance. You have been perſuaded, "by the mercies of God, and by the terrors of the Lord," to repent, to forſake your ſins, and to turn moſt heartily unto God. And from the ſolicitude which you early diſcovered for inſtruction, and from the apparently open and candid acknowledgments which you have made of the errors of your paſt life, we have reaſon to hope, that ſome good fruits have been produced in your heart: but, if you have impoſed on your ſincereſt friends, and deceived yourſelf, let me exhort you, in the moſt ſerious and pathetic manner, by the mercies of God, and by the affection which you bear to your own ſoul, to renounce your hypocriſy this inſtant; to acknowledge your multiplied tranſgreſſions with the deepeſt humility; and to turn unto God with your whole heart.

Within a few moments, you will be taken from the houſe of God, carried to the place of execution, and "appear before the judgment-ſeat of Chriſt, to receive the deeds done in your body, whether they be good

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or bad." You have juſt heard the certainty, circumſtances, and deſign of this judgment; and the paſſing interval before you muſt awaken all the powers of your ſoul! It is enough to overpower your ſenſibility, unaccompanied and alone; and much more ſo, attended by the habiliments of death, and by thouſands of ſurrounding ſpectators.

O, my brother! thus encompaſſed with the ſorrows of the grave, and the ſnares of death, you ſtand in need of every conſolation. And, to aſſiſt and ſupport you in this moſt diſtreſſing hour, and to ſhew the part which it becomes you to perform, "look unto Jeſus, the author and finiſher of our faith." It is true, the difference in point of character is infinite: For, although he died the death of a malefactor, he died perfectly innocent of every crime. *He* died to ſupport the cauſe of piety and virtue, and to ſave ſinners: but *you* will die a malefactor indeed—for your atrocious crimes—becauſe you have diſregarded the principles of religion, and ſhed the blood of one, whom he died to redeem.

Our bleſſed Lord and Maſter endured the croſs, deſpiſing the ſhame. And he ſuffered that ignominious and painful death with the moſt perfect ſubmiſſion to the will of his Father, with the moſt heroic fortitude and equanimity of mind, and in the exerciſe of a moſt charitable and forgiving temper, even towards his enemies, and thoſe who perſecuted him unto death, and who inſulted him in his laſt agonies.

And you have the example of one, who was a great ſinner, and who ſuffered with him; and whoſe faith was not to be ſhaken by all the terrors of a lingering,

ſhameful

ſhameful death. Although he ſaw the Savior of the world nailed to the croſs, and knew that he would expire within a few hours; yet he believed on him, and died entirely reſigned to the will of God. He died with chriſtian fortitude and ſubmiſſion; he died a ſincere penitent; and he died in prayer—"Lord, remember me, when thou comeſt into thy kingdom." And as a reward of his faith, penitence and obedience, Chriſt anſwered him, and ſaid, "To-day ſhalt thou be with me in paradiſe." And O that you, my brother, may diſcover this believing, reſigned and heavenly temper, at the hour of your departure, and be admitted into the kingdom of the Great Redeemer!

Now, "unto God's gracious mercy and protection we commit thee; the Lord bleſs thee, and keep thee; the Lord make his face to ſhine upon thee, and be gracious unto thee; the Lord lift up his countenance upon thee, and give thee peace, both now and evermore."

Let us pray, &c.

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